

## ***FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** July 12, 2012

**Agenda Item:** 2012 Final Wolf Season Framework

**Division:** Fish & Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Approval of Final Rule

**Time Needed for Presentation:** 1 hour

**Background:** Regulated public hunting and trapping of wolves was endorsed by the Governor's Wolf Advisory Council in 2000 and is included in Montana's wolf conservation and management plan. The FWP Commission adopted a conservative hunting-only quota of 75 wolves for the 2009 season. That wolf hunting season closed with a legal harvest of 72. The minimum wolf count increased in 2009 from 497 to 524 wolves. For the 2010 season (blocked by court ruling) the Commission adopted a statewide quota of 186 with 13 wolf management units (WMU's). The 2011 season had a statewide hunting-only quota of 220 wolves with 14 WMUs. Modeling predicted harvest equal to this quota would result in up to a 25% percent reduction from the 2010 minimum of 566 to 425. Including a season extension to February 15, 166 wolves were harvested with three of the 14 WMU's closing due to their quota being met. The 45 wolves taken after December 31 were not subtracted from the 2011 year end minimum count of 653 wolves.

Modeling suggests harvest of up to 377 wolves would not reduce the population below 15 breeding pairs, and the model predicts a year-end, minimum population of 485 wolves. Given that, and experience gained from previous seasons, simplified regulations are recommended with the intent of increasing harvest. The framework includes a general season with no statewide quota and two quota areas near Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks. Mandatory harvest reporting within 24 hours is proposed to maintain management capacity for assessing harvest. Updates will be provided to the Commission, along with authority to implement season closures.

The following changes to the initial proposal are proposed for final adoption:

- The 24 hour reporting requirement would be relaxed to 24 hours from arrival at the trailhead in backcountry areas, except in WMU 316 which has a harvest quota.
- Addition of requirements for reporting and required procedures for trappers that capture non-target, protected wildlife and domestic dogs.
- Increase the fall 2012 bag limit to three wolves, one of which could be taken via hunting.
- Clarification that the regular rifle season (non-backcountry) would begin on October 15<sup>th</sup>.
- Allow those who attended the Idaho wolf trapping course to trap wolves in Montana without attending the Montana wolf trapping course.

Otherwise, season dates, quotas, WMU boundaries, trapping rules, and other elements would remain unchanged from the May proposal.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** Public comment ran through 5:00 PM Monday, June 25. Public meetings were held in Regions 1 – 5. FWP received 6,505 comments that were forwarded to the Commission. Public comments were generally divided along two lines of advocacy including those advocating more harvest and reduced populations, and those advocating less harvest.

**Alternatives and Analysis:** Except for two areas near national parks, fixed quotas are not proposed as experience has shown that they have not improved management effectiveness. Harvest monitoring and the authority for season closures remain.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** The proposal is aligned with known biology, management history and experience, survey efforts, and public comment. This proposal is consistent with other species proposals and continues to value wolves as an integral component of functioning ecosystems.

**Proposed Motion:** I move to adopt the final 2012 wolf season as presented by FWP to include later adjustments to bag limit and electronic calling if statutory adjustments allow.